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NEWS

Tuesday January 10, 2017

'Nobel for Math'

1972 University of Dayton graduate Richard Schoen won the Wolf Prize in Mathematics, a top international prize that's among a trio often mentioned in the same breath as "a Nobel for math."

Not bad for someone whose mother was concerned he couldn't hold a steady job.

"Most academics move around a lot. I remember when I first graduated, had a post doc and moved somewhere else, my mother was concerned I couldn't hold a steady job," said Schoen, who has held posts at Stanford, California Berkeley, NYU and Princeton, among others.

But what would she have thought about this?

"She was a very underspoken person. She was quite proud of the children, in general when they did good things, but she wouldn't want to make a big fuss because it might be favoring me over the others," said Schoen, the 10th of 13 children who grew up on a farm near Ft. Recovery, Ohio. "But I think she'd be proud of this."

Schoen (pronounced SHANE), currently the Excellence in Teaching Chair at the University of California, Irvine, researches Albert Einstein's equations of general relativity and gravitation plus differential geometry, or the study of curved spaces.

He was interested in math from a young age. He followed two brothers, who also earned doctorates in math, to UD.

"When I was in middle and high school, my brothers would get me books that I worked on," he said. "I sort of intended to do something in math (for a career), but I didn't really quite know what that would mean."

Schoen came to UD as a math major during the "Sputnik era" when there was a big emphasis on math and science education and "UD was sending a lot of students to Ph.D. programs."

"UD prepared me very well for graduate school. I found myself quite prepared, in fact better than a lot of the kids who came from more prestigious schools," Schoen said.

In addition to grad school, Schoen said his time at Dayton prepared him for his career.

"The faculty at Dayton were all Ph.D.s and had published papers, so I got some idea from them about mathematical research," he said. "The nice thing about UD is I knew the faculty very well. I viewed them not only as teachers but as friends. Being at Dayton also gave me a better understanding of how to interact with students."

Established by the Wolf Foundation and administered by the state of Israel, Wolf Prizes go to outstanding international experts in physics, chemistry, mathematics, medicine and the arts. Israeli President Reuven Rivlin will present the awards this summer at the Knesset Building, home to the Israeli parliament.

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